Manifesto

Life has one organising principle:
the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.
All other pursuits are subordinate.

NEO BOESAK

A Philosophy of Knowing, with a Story of One Man Who Learned It

2026

EPISTEMEISM MANIFESTO

A Philosophy of Knowing, with a Story of One Man Who Learned It

NEO BOESAK

Independent Philosophical Work — 2026

"Dare to know. Have the courage to use your own understanding."

— Immanuel Kant, What is Enlightenment? (1784)

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PREFACE: A NOTE ON THIS BOOK

This volume contains two things bound into one. The first is a work of philosophical fiction — the story of one Leo Bodase, a man who lost everything and found, in the ruins of himself, the only thing worth finding. The second is a philosophical manifesto — an attempt to articulate, with the rigour that the subject demands, a framework for human life organised around the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

These two parts are not separate. The story is the argument made flesh. The manifesto is the story's skeleton. Together they constitute what the author calls Epistemeism: the position that the defining function of human life is to know, to examine, and to correct.

The story is written in the tradition of Dostoevsky and Kafka: the psychological weight of the unexamined life, the slow and painful process of becoming, and the discovery that the examined self is not a comfortable thing to find but the only authentic one available. The manifesto is written in the tradition of Marx's great pamphlet: declarative, urgent, structured to persuade, and aware that the stakes are not academic.

This work is incomplete. That is not an apology. It is a statement of principle. A philosophy that declares itself finished has already begun to lie.

— Neo Boesak, 2026

PART

ONE

THE DESCENT AND ASCENT OF LEO BODASE

A Philosophical Fiction

"The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved."
— Mother Teresa

"Man is condemned to be free."
— Jean-Paul Sartre

PROLOGUE

There are men who disappear without dying. They continue to draw breath, to purchase bread, to occupy space in the world — but something essential has gone out of them, the way a candle goes out not in a dramatic gust but in a slow exhaustion of its own substance. Leo Bodase was such a man.

He had not always been this way. Once — and this is not a romanticisation but a plain fact — he had been a young man of considerable promise. His mother had called him her philosopher. His secondary school teachers had remarked upon a quality of attention in him, a capacity for sustained thought, that distinguished him from his peers. He had read voraciously: novels, newspapers, the back of cereal boxes if nothing else was available. He had married at twenty-six, had a daughter at twenty-eight, and had worked for nine years at a firm that did something with logistics — he had never found a way to explain it that did not sound like a confession of failure.

The drinking began before the marriage ended. The pills began after. The harder things came later, with the particular inevitability of a man who has stopped caring about his own life

but has not yet stopped wanting to feel something in it.

He was forty-three years old and the apartment on Berea Street smelled of him.

CHAPTER I

THE WEIGHT OF NOTHING

Leo Bodase woke at half past one in the afternoon to the sound of his neighbour's television — a game show, the host's laughter penetrating the thin wall with obscene cheerfulness. He lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, which was yellowed in one corner from a leak that had been reported to the building manager fourteen months ago and had not been repaired.

He was aware, in the way that one is aware of a persistent low-grade fever, of the fact that this was Wednesday. He had lost Monday entirely. Tuesday existed only as a series of disconnected images: a bottle, the face of a man in a shop, the particular quality of afternoon light on the pavement outside the off-licence.

What struck him, lying there in the unwashed sheets, was a sensation he could only describe as an absence of sensation. Not pain. Not despair — despair, at least, implies a consciousness that things could be otherwise. What Leo felt was a kind of absolute flatness, as though the interior

landscape of his being had been surveyed and found to contain nothing worth mapping.

He reached for his phone. Three missed calls from his sister. A message from a debt collection agency. A notification from an application he had downloaded in a moment of uncharacteristic optimism six months ago — a daily philosophical quote.

He almost did not read it. His thumb moved toward the delete button with the automatic efficiency of a man who has learned to preemptively refuse small happinesses.

But he did not delete it.

The quote was from Marcus Aurelius: Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one.

Leo placed the phone face-down on the mattress and closed his eyes.

He was not moved by this. He was not transformed. But something — the particular combination of that sentence and that ceiling and that game show laughter — produced in him a reaction that he would later struggle to describe. It was not inspiration. It was closer to shame. A specific, clarifying shame: the recognition, sudden and unignorable, that he was not merely suffering. He was choosing to suffer. He was, in some fundamental and unacknowledged way, cooperating with his own destruction.

He fell back asleep. But he did not sleep easily, and in the not-sleeping, something had begun.

CHAPTER II

THE ARTICLE

Three weeks later, in the public library on the ground floor of the building he could not afford to leave, Leo Bodase sat in front of a computer terminal because his phone had been disconnected.

He had come to use the internet to apply for an extension on his rent arrears. The application required documentation he did not have, in a format he did not understand, through a portal that required a verification code sent to an email address he had not accessed in two years. He sat for forty minutes navigating the bureaucratic architecture of managed poverty and then, with the particular exhaustion of a man who has been defeated by a form, he opened a new tab without particular intention.

He typed: why do people destroy themselves.

This was not a clinical inquiry. It was not the beginning of a research project. It was the kind of question a man types when he has been defeated by a form and is sitting in a public library on a Tuesday morning, and he has, for one unguarded

moment, allowed himself to acknowledge that the question is about him.

The third result was a longer piece from an online magazine — not academic, but written with the seriousness of someone who had read the relevant literature. It was titled: The Shadow and the Wound: Carl Jung on Why We Become Our Own Enemies.

Leo read it. He read it three times.

The article explained, with reasonable clarity, Jung's concept of the shadow: the unconscious repository of everything a person has refused to acknowledge about themselves — the drives, the failures, the capacities, the desires that the conscious self has found too threatening to integrate. The shadow does not disappear because it is refused. It accumulates. It acts. It expresses itself sideways, through compulsion and projection and the strange gravity that pulls certain people inexorably toward the destruction of what they love.

Leo sat very still.

He thought about his daughter. Her name was Amara. She was fourteen years old and lived with her mother in Soweto and had stopped sending him messages eighteen months ago, after the last time he had promised to come to her school play and had not come.

He thought: I have been becoming my own shadow for a long time.

This was not a cure. But it was, as he would later understand, a diagnosis. And a diagnosis, even a painful one, is the beginning of something. Before a diagnosis, there is only confusion. After a diagnosis, there is at least the possibility of direction.

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOW AND THE SELF

Thinking, for Leo Bodase, was a painful and unfamiliar exercise, in the same way that an atrophied muscle, when it is finally called upon to work, protests with a specificity of pain that is somehow more alarming than general discomfort. He had not thought — truly thought, with the deliberate application of reason to a question — for years. He had reacted. He had managed the immediate problem of his consciousness with chemicals, but he had not thought.

He returned to the library the next day, and the day after that.

He found, with the methodical desperation of a man who has found one thread and is pulling it, a copy of Jung's Man and His Symbols. The library copy was old, with the particular smell of books that have been read by many hands over many years, and someone had underlined passages in pencil throughout. Leo read the pencilled underlinings first, trying to understand what some earlier reader had found significant.

Jung wrote of the individuation process — the lifelong work of becoming a whole person, which required the integration of the shadow rather than its suppression. The unconscious was not the enemy of the self. It was the undeveloped country of the self, the unmapped territory that contained, along with the monsters, the resources a person needed to be fully human.

Leo read this and understood, in his body before his mind, that he had been living as a partial person. That the drugs were not the cause of his diminishment. They were the symptom. The cause was somewhere older, darker, and more specific: a refusal, accumulated over decades, to look directly at what he was.

He read for six hours. When the library closed at five, he sat outside on a bench in the February sun and felt — not happiness, nothing so large as happiness — but a quality of aliveness that he had not felt in years.

He did not use anything that night. He lay in the flat and let his mind work and endured the discomfort of sobriety the way a man endures a cold bath: gritting his teeth, reasoning through it, arriving on the other side shaking but intact.

He told himself: one night. Just to see if I can.

CHAPTER **IV**

THE LIBRARY

He began to live at the library. This is not a metaphor. He spent nine, ten, twelve hours there on the days when the flat became intolerable — which was most days. He read Jung and then, following the citations in Jung, he read Freud and then Nietzsche and then — at the suggestion of a librarian named Mrs Khumalo, who noticed that he was reading seriously and treated him accordingly — he read Aristotle.

He was not, at this stage, a recovered man. He was a man in the process of not-using, which is different from recovery in the same way that a building under construction is different from a house: the structure is incomplete, the materials are not yet secured, and rain can still get in. There were nights of failure. There were mornings of the specific self-contempt that follows failure.

What kept him returning was not willpower, which he did not trust, but something more durable: curiosity. He had discovered, or rather rediscovered, that his mind was capable of engagement, and that engagement was a form of

relief more lasting than chemicals. When he was genuinely thinking — following an argument, disagreeing with a claim, returning to a passage to understand it better — the craving retreated.

He read Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and encountered the concept of eudaimonia — flourishing, the good life, understood not as a state of pleasant feeling but as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. He felt a recognition that was almost violent in its intensity: the sense that the life he had been living was not merely unfortunate but wrong in some deeper sense, a wrongness that had everything to do with the abandonment of his own nature.

He began to take notes. He filled the margins of a notebook with questions. He wrote a three-page analysis of Jung's theory of projection and left it on Mrs Khumalo's desk.

She read it. She told him it was good. She showed him the university open lectures schedule.

He took the paper. He folded it and put it in his pocket and carried it there for a week before he used it.

CHAPTER V

THE LONG WITHDRAWAL

The withdrawal — from the substances, from the particular chemistry of managed numbness — was not dramatic. In novels and films, it tends to be portrayed as a crisis of shaking and sweat, a few days of agony that, once endured, deliver a person into clarity. The reality was slower and more insulting. It was a year.

He found a clinic — a free one, because he had no money — and attended group sessions with the same grudging consistency with which he attended the library. He did not find the sessions transformative. He found them instructive in a different way: they showed him how many people were living in the same condition he had been living in, and how many of them had never had a single encounter with the question of what they were for.

He began to see his own history not as a personal failure but as an epistemic one. He had not been taught — not by his parents, not by his schooling, not by the culture he inhabited — that the examined life was a real and available option.

He had been given tools for survival — work, marriage, obligation — but not for understanding, and when the tools of survival failed, he had had nothing to fall back on.

This was not absolution. He bore responsibility for his choices. But responsibility without understanding is merely guilt, and guilt without direction is merely another substance — a way of feeling something without doing anything.

He was doing something now.

CHAPTER VI

THE LECTURES

The lecture theatre smelled of chalk dust and institutional carpet cleaner. Leo arrived fifteen minutes early and sat in the back row — the habit of a man who had learned to enter spaces sideways, without announcing himself, in case the space turned out not to want him.

The lecturer was Professor Elias Dlamini, who taught in the Department of Philosophy. The lecture that day was on epistemology — the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and limits of knowledge. Dlamini introduced the subject with the observation that epistemology was, in a sense, prior to all other philosophy: before one could ask what was good, or what was beautiful, or what was real, one had to ask what it meant to know anything at all.

Leo wrote this down. He wrote it down with the specific intensity of a person who is hearing something they have been waiting to hear without knowing they were waiting.

Dlamini introduced the Gettier problem: explaining how a three-page paper written in

1963 had permanently disrupted a definition philosophy had held since Plato. He said: in philosophy, even the most settled questions are never really settled. He said: that is not a weakness. That is the health of the discipline.

Leo returned the following Thursday. And the Thursday after that. He brought his notebook. He argued, on paper, with the arguments being made on the stage.

In October, after three months of attending, he stayed after class to ask a question.

CHAPTER VII

PROFESSOR DLAMINI

Dlamini was packing his notes when Leo approached. Leo asked him about a claim Dlamini had made regarding Hume's argument that reason cannot motivate action, that only desire can drive human behaviour, and that reason is in this sense always the servant of desire and never its master.

Dlamini looked at him with the slightly surprised expression of a man who had not expected a question of that quality from the direction it came from. He said: tell me your name.

They talked for forty-five minutes about Hume and Kant and the question of moral motivation, and when they were done Dlamini asked Leo what his academic background was.

Leo said: secondary school. A logistics firm. A library.

Dlamini was quiet for a moment. Then he said: are you aware that you argue like someone who has been reading seriously?

Leo said: I have been reading seriously.

Dlamini said: have you considered applying to study? He gave Leo a name in the admissions office. He said: go and speak to her. Tell her I sent you.

Leo left the lecture theatre and stood in the corridor for a long time. Students moved past him in groups, speaking about things that had nothing to do with philosophy. He stood there in the middle of their movement, which parted around him the way water parts around a stone.

He was not happy. He was something older and more durable than happy. He was, for the first time in years, in the process of becoming what he might have always been.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEGREE

He was accepted into the psychology programme at forty-four, with students who were half his age and twice his certainty about everything, and he sat among them with his notebook and his questions and his hard-won incapacity for comfortable belief.

He was not the most naturally gifted student in his cohort. But he was, his lecturers agreed privately and eventually said publicly, the most honest. He had an unusual relationship with the experience of being wrong: rather than treating it as a threat to his identity, he treated it as information. He revised his positions openly, in front of others, without apparent distress.

One of his lecturers said, in a moment of frankness: I have been teaching for twenty years and I have never seen a student quite so willing to abandon a position when the evidence demands it.

Leo thought: that is because I spent fifteen years defending a position that was destroying me, and I know what defending wrong positions costs.

He wrote a dissertation on the psychology of self-destructive behaviour, which his supervisor called the most personally honest piece of academic work she had received in a decade. It was not confessional. It was rigorous. It was the work of a man who had found, in the methods of inquiry, the instrument through which experience becomes knowledge.

He qualified. He went to the library on Berea Street, sat in his usual chair, and read. He read because it was the only activity he had found in which the purpose was identical to the method: to understand more was both the goal and the path.

CHAPTER IX

REUNION

He wrote to Amara three months before his graduation. He said: I know that I failed you. I know that words cost nothing and that what matters is what a person does over time. I am doing something over time now. I am not asking you to trust me. I am asking only for the opportunity to show you, over whatever time you are willing to give, what I have become.

She did not reply for six weeks.

When she replied, she was brief. She said: I will give you one hour.

They met at a coffee shop in the city centre. Amara was seventeen — nearly eighteen — and had her mother's stillness and her father's eyes. She sat across from him with her coffee untouched and looked at him the way a person looks at someone they are trying to square with an earlier image: checking, measuring, refusing to commit to a conclusion before the evidence was in.

She asked him specific questions: when had he stopped using? Why? What had changed? She listened without interrupting.

She said: I found your dissertation online.

She said: did you read to understand yourself, or to escape yourself?

It was the best question anyone had ever asked him. He thought about it for a long moment, refusing the easy answer.

He said: both. At first, to escape. But you cannot really escape yourself through understanding. Understanding pulls you toward yourself. So it became about myself, in the end. About what I was. About whether it was still possible to become what I might have been.

She picked up her coffee. She finished it. And when he said, at the end of the hour, that he would respect whatever boundary she chose, she said: same time next week.

He walked out and stood on the pavement in the November heat and was not sure whether what he was feeling was happiness or grief or something that contained both, something that required a word he had not yet found.

CHAPTER X

THE EPISTEMEIST

Leo Bodase is now forty-seven years old.

He works as a counsellor at the same free clinic that once offered him group sessions. He reads in the morning before his clients arrive. He reads in the evenings. He attends philosophy lectures when they are open, and sits in the front row now, not the back.

He is not a saint. He does not pretend to have solved himself. There are weeks that are harder than others, mornings when the old gravity exerts itself and has to be answered with a specific stubbornness that has become, over time, a form of discipline. But he has not used in six years.

He sees Amara on Sundays. She is studying law. She has her mother's stillness and her father's eyes and — he has noticed this only recently, with a quality of recognition that is almost unbearable — her father's questions. She argues with things. She refuses easy answers. She holds claims up to the light and turns them, looking for the weak points.

He thinks about knowledge the way other men think about air — as the medium through which everything else happens, so fundamental that it cannot really be separated from being. He organises his life around the proposition that the highest human function is to know, to examine, and to correct. He holds this not as a certainty but as the best available hypothesis, surviving all his attempts to falsify it.

He calls this Epistemeism. Not because the name matters, but because names allow things to be thought about precisely.

He is, in the most serious sense he knows how to use, still learning.

EPILOGUE: THE PARABLE'S LESSON

The philosophers say that a man is not defined by the condition of his arrival but by the direction of his becoming. Leo Bodase arrived late. He arrived damaged. He arrived with compound interest owing on years of chosen darkness. But he arrived. And the direction of his arrival was always the same: inward and then outward, from ignorance to examination, from the shadow to the light it casts.

This is not a fairy tale. There is no final transformation, no moment at which the work is done. There is only the continued practice: examine, correct, repeat. The examined life is not a destination. It is a method. And a method, unlike a destination, cannot be reached and abandoned. It must be practiced every day, with the discipline of someone who knows what the alternative looks like.

The alternative is the apartment on Berea Street, the yellowed ceiling, the game show laughter through the wall.

Leo Bodase chose differently.

This is the sum of what philosophy offers: the capacity to choose differently. Not better

circumstances, not guaranteed happiness, not protection from loss — but the cognitive instruments to understand one's own situation clearly enough to act from reason rather than from compulsion.

That is enough. That is, in fact, everything.

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PART

TWO

EPISTEMEISM

A Philosophical Manifesto

"The unexamined life is not worth living."
— Socrates

"Dare to know. Have the courage to use your own understanding."
— Immanuel Kant

"The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."
— Steve Biko

“Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.”
— Carl Sagan

ABSTRACT

This manifesto presents Epistemeism: the philosophical position that the defining function of human life is the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. It is not a modest position. It claims, against the comfort-seeking tendencies of ordinary life and the wisdom-suspecting tendencies of much contemporary culture, that a human being who does not take seriously the responsibility to know is a human being operating below the level of their own nature.

The claim is not new. Aristotle made a version of it. So did Socrates, who considered the unexamined life not worth living. So did Kant, who demanded that every person have the courage to use their own understanding. So did Biko, who understood that the colonisation of the mind is the most complete and most durable form of oppression. What Epistemeism adds is a systematic framework for individual and collective life organised around epistemic virtue — and an honest engagement with the serious objections this position faces.

This manifesto operates within the tradition of virtue epistemology. It engages African philosophical thought, specifically Ubuntu and the

epistemic liberation argued by Biko and Fanon. It draws on Aristotle's concept of theoria, Popper's falsificationism, Hume's analysis of reason and emotion, and Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge.

It acknowledges, from the outset, that no manifesto can be a finished system. A philosophy that claims completeness has stopped thinking. This one has not stopped. Critique is not its enemy. Critique is its mechanism.

SECTION I

A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING REASON

A spectre is haunting the modern world — the spectre of chosen ignorance. In an era of unprecedented access to information, in a civilisation that has produced instruments of inquiry of extraordinary power — universities, journals, laboratories, networks that can connect any question with any answer in seconds — the dominant tendency of human culture is not toward knowing but away from it. People have more access to information than any generation before them and are, on the evidence available, less willing to engage with it rigorously.

This is not a paradox. It is a predictable consequence of the failure to treat knowledge as a value rather than a tool. A tool is used when convenient and set aside when not. A value organises a life. The modern world has produced extraordinary instruments for knowing and has made the catastrophic error of treating them as a means to comfort rather than as a demand upon character.

The Epistemeist position is not that people are stupid. It is that people have not been taught — by their families, their schools, their cultures — that knowing is a duty. That the examined life is not a

luxury available to academics and the leisure class, but the minimal requirement for a human being who wishes to be something more than the managed object of the systems that surround them.

The history of human civilisation is, at its core, the history of the struggle between knowledge and its suppression. Every advance of genuine consequence — the germ theory of disease, the abolition of the slave trade, the recognition of women as full persons under law — was achieved by people who refused to defer to authority, tradition, or comfort in the face of evidence. Every stagnation, every atrocity, every period of collective diminishment has been enabled by the surrender of critical thought to dogma, ideology, and the desire to belong.

The stakes of this struggle are not academic. They are existential.

SECTION II

THE FOUNDING DEFINITION

Life has one organising principle: the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. All other pursuits are subordinate. A life not ordered toward knowing is a life misused.

Epistemeism holds that the human function is to know. Reason, perception, memory, and

dialogue exist to apprehend what is true. To neglect this function is to become a thing that breathes without purpose. Truth is not optional. Truth is not negotiable. Truth is not a matter of preference, consensus, or power.

Knowledge, as used here, means justified understanding of reality. Opinion, belief, and unexamined feeling are not knowledge in this sense. Knowledge requires reasons, coherence with reality, and resistance to refutation. Wisdom is the ordered application of knowledge to life. Without knowledge, wisdom is impossible. Without wisdom, knowledge is dangerous.

This does not mean that every person must become an academic or a scientist. It means that every person must take seriously the responsibility to examine, to question, and to correct. The farmer who examines the soil, who asks why this crop failed — the parent who examines their assumptions about their child — the politician who demands evidence before committing public resources: all are practicing Epistemeism. The domain does not matter. The orientation does.

Epistemeism rejects all systems that place themselves above inquiry. Tradition, ideology, revelation, and authority are examined — not obeyed. If they survive examination, they stand. If they do not, they fall. No doctrine is exempt. The

mind does not serve the tribe, the state, the church, or the self. The mind serves truth.

SECTION III

ON THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

Before prescribing how knowledge should be pursued, Epistemeism must account for what knowledge is. This is not a merely technical question. It is the foundation upon which everything else rests, and a foundation laid carelessly will eventually shift.

The classical definition, inherited from Plato and refined over two and a half millennia, holds that knowledge is justified true belief. A person knows that P when: P is true; the person believes that P; and the person has adequate justification for believing that P. This definition survived largely intact until 1963, when Edmund Gettier published a three-page paper demonstrating that a person can hold a belief that is both justified and true without genuinely knowing the thing in question — because the justification may be accidentally related to the truth rather than causally connected to it.

The Gettier problem has never been satisfactorily resolved. Epistemeism adopts a working definition adequate to its purposes: knowledge is justified understanding of reality, produced by methods — empirical, logical, mathematical — that are themselves subject to

examination, that generate conclusions consistent with the available evidence, and that are open to revision when that evidence changes.

We know, in the sense Epistemeism requires, that the earth is approximately four and a half billion years old. We know that natural selection is the mechanism of species change. We know that the speed of light is a constant, and that the universe began in an event of extraordinary energy. We know these things in the sense that we have methods that have produced them and have resisted all serious attempts at refutation.

Between the known and the genuinely unknown lies a vast territory of the contested, the insufficiently examined, and the mistaken. The Epistemeist is at home in this territory. The Epistemeist does not require resolution where there is none. What the Epistemeist requires is honesty about which category a given claim falls into: genuinely known, genuinely unknown, or contested. The conflation of these categories is the primary epistemic disease of our time.

SECTION IV

THE HISTORY OF EPISTEMIC OPPRESSION

No account of knowledge and its pursuit can be given without an account of its suppression, because the two are inseparable. Every system of

power produces an epistemology that justifies it, and every epistemology that challenges power is suppressed.

The Inquisition did not oppose Galileo because it had calculated his results and found them wrong. It opposed him because his results implied a universe in which human beings were not the central concern of a personal god — which implied a social order the Church could not control. The suppression of heliocentrism was not an epistemic event. It was a political one, conducted with epistemic tools.

The apartheid regime in South Africa produced an elaborate apparatus of academic and scientific justification for racial hierarchy. Its universities generated papers on the cognitive differences between racial groups. Its theologians produced readings of scripture that located the separation of peoples in divine command. These were not sincere errors. They were lies manufactured in the service of power, demonstrating what Foucault argued: that the regime of truth — the set of claims permitted to count as knowledge — is produced and maintained by the institutions that serve the dominant interests of that society.

Steve Biko understood this more clearly than most philosophers of his era. His analysis of Black Consciousness was, at its core, an epistemological

intervention: the argument that a people whose self-understanding has been colonised by the categories of their oppressors cannot liberate themselves politically until they have first liberated themselves intellectually. The revolution he called for was cognitive before it was political. It was a reclamation of the right to define oneself, to articulate one's own experience in one's own categories, to produce knowledge from one's own standpoint.

Epistemeism names these operations for what they are: attacks on the epistemic capacity of human beings. And it responds with the only adequate response: the insistence that every person, regardless of origin, culture, or circumstance, possesses the capacity for genuine inquiry and is owed the conditions under which that capacity can be exercised.

SECTION V

THE EPISTEMEIST VIRTUES

Philosophy has distinguished, from its earliest recorded moments, between the possession of knowledge and the character required to pursue it well. Epistemeism holds that the central epistemic virtues constitute a form of moral excellence in their own right.

Intellectual honesty is the primary virtue. It requires the willingness to acknowledge what one does not know, the refusal to claim more certainty than one has, and the discipline to distinguish between one's desires regarding how things are and one's best assessment of how things are. The intellectually honest person says: I do not know. They say it without shame, because they understand that not-knowing is not a failure but the accurate beginning of inquiry.

The willingness to revise belief is the second virtue. A belief held in the face of countervailing evidence is not a sign of strength. It is a sign of confusion about what beliefs are for. Beliefs are the best available working models of how things are, and they must be updated when the evidence requires it. The person who revises their views frequently is not unstable. They are doing the work.

Courage in argument is the third virtue. Intellectual cowardice — the tendency to soften a conclusion, to avoid a confrontation, to retreat from an argument that will make one unpopular — is as genuine a failure of character as physical cowardice. To follow an argument to its conclusion regardless of where it leads, to state that conclusion clearly and without softening, to hold a position against social pressure when one has reason to believe it is correct — these require a form of courage that Epistemeism places at the centre of its ethics.

Epistemic humility is the fourth virtue. This is distinct from intellectual cowardice. Courage means stating one's conclusions clearly; humility means acknowledging that one's conclusions might be wrong. The dogmatist holds positions as though abandoning them would constitute a kind of death. The Epistemeist holds positions as though abandoning them, when the evidence requires it, is the very point of having held them.

SECTION VI

THE EPISTEMEIST VICES

Wilful ignorance is the refusal to know what one could know. It is the deliberate turning away from evidence, the cultivation of incuriosity as a defensive posture. In a private person, it is a

failure of character. In a public official, a journalist, a judge, or a scientist, it is a form of corruption.

Dogmatism is the insistence that certain positions are exempt from examination. It presents itself as conviction and strength, but it is closer to cowardice: the refusal to submit one's positions to scrutiny because one cannot bear the possibility that they would not survive it. Dogmatism is the enemy of genuine knowledge and therefore the enemy of the human species, which can only advance by discovering and correcting its errors.

Sophistry is the use of the forms of argument to generate conclusions that the arguer knows, or should know, are unjustified. It is distinguished from honest error — the inevitable companion of genuine inquiry — by its deliberateness. The sophist knows, or has refused to check, that their conclusion does not follow from their premises.

The use of knowledge for status or control is the final vice, and in some ways the most serious, because it corrupts not just one person but the entire epistemic enterprise. Knowledge is not a weapon. It is not a credential. The person who deploys knowledge for status — who uses their expertise to dominate rather than illuminate, who withholds information to maintain power — has betrayed the purpose of knowing.

SECTION VII

THE HUMAN FUNCTION: A TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT REVISED

Aristotle argued that every thing has a function — a characteristic activity in the performance of which it achieves its excellence. The function of the eye is to see; a good eye sees clearly. What is the function of a human being?

Aristotle's answer was that the human function is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason — what he called logos. The human being is distinguished from other animals by the capacity for rational thought, and the excellent human being exercises this capacity well. The highest expression of this excellence is theoria — contemplative inquiry — the activity of pure understanding pursued for its own sake.

This is a beautiful argument. It is also, on the face of it, incompatible with what evolutionary biology has established about human origins. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection has no room for biological purposes. It selects for reproductive success, not for understanding. A creature that thinks profoundly but reproduces poorly is an evolutionary dead end, however magnificent its understanding.

Epistemeism accepts this challenge and responds directly. The teleological claim is

reframed. Epistemeism does not assert that human beings are biologically designed to know. It asserts that the highest life a human being can choose is the life of knowing and seeking wisdom. This is a normative claim, not a biological one. One need only ask: what kind of life produces the richest human experience? What kind of life is most capable of self-correction, of growth, of contribution to the lives of others? The life of genuine inquiry answers all these questions more adequately than its alternatives.

The objection that knowledge is not the highest good — that love, or beauty, or justice, or happiness is higher — always faces the same response: the identification of love as the highest good, or beauty, or justice, requires reasons. It requires an argument. It requires an exercise of precisely the faculty that Epistemeism holds to be the highest. One cannot argue that knowing is subordinate to something else without using the instruments of knowing to make the case.

SECTION VIII

REASON, EMOTION, AND THE INNER LIFE

The original formulation of Epistemeism treated opinion, belief, and feeling as categorically distinct from knowledge, implying that emotion is noise rather than signal. This requires correction.

David Hume argued that reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions. By this he meant that reason is an instrument: it tells us how to achieve ends, but it cannot by itself determine what ends to pursue. The determination of ends — the fundamental orientation of human will toward this rather than that — is a function of desire, emotion, and feeling, not of pure reason.

Antonio Damasio's research on patients with damage to the emotional centres of the brain confirmed Hume's insight. Such patients retained their full rational capacity — they could reason correctly, construct valid arguments, identify relevant considerations. But they could not make decisions. Without the felt sense that some options matter more than others, their reason spun in a frictionless void.

Emotion, then, is not the enemy of reason. It is a component of the cognitive system. It carries information that pure reason cannot generate: information about what matters, what is dangerous, what is valuable. Fear signals genuine threat. Love signals genuine value. Grief signals genuine loss. These are not distortions of a correctly-functioning rational mind. They are data.

But emotion carries information only when it is examined. Unexamined emotion is not a source of knowledge. It is a source of reactivity. The Epistemeist does not suppress emotion. They

examine it as evidence. The unexamined life is not worth living. This applies to the inner life as much as the external world.

SECTION IX

ON MEANING, THE ABSURD, AND THE EXAMINED LIFE

The most serious challenge to the Epistemeist position comes not from whether knowledge is achievable but from whether it is sufficient. Even if the pursuit of knowledge produces genuine understanding and wisdom — is it enough? Does it provide what human beings most urgently need, which is not merely clarity but meaning?

Albert Camus confronted this question with greater honesty than almost any other modern philosopher. In The Myth of Sisyphus, he argued that the human being's fundamental condition is absurd: we crave meaning in a universe that offers none, and we must either acknowledge this honestly — which he called lucidity — or retreat into the bad faith leap to a religious or ideological system that falsely promises to resolve the absurdity.

Viktor Frankl's response comes from a different direction — from the experience of the most extreme suffering available to a human being. Frankl survived Auschwitz and argued that the human being can endure almost any suffering provided they possess a sufficient reason for enduring it. Meaning is not a luxury. It is the fundamental motivation of human life.

Epistemeism acknowledges both arguments. It acknowledges that meaning functions psychologically regardless of whether it can be justified philosophically. But it maintains that a meaning which collapses under scrutiny is a fragile foundation. The meaning that has been examined, tested, and chosen with full awareness of the alternatives — that meaning is durable. It can withstand the pressures placed on it.

Epistemeism does not promise happiness. It promises clarity. Happiness without clarity is self-deception. Clarity without happiness is still better than a life built on lies.

SECTION X

THE UBUNTU ENGAGEMENT

Ubuntu is the philosophical tradition of sub-Saharan Africa that holds personhood to be irreducibly relational. The formulation most often cited — umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, a person is a person through other persons — expresses a view of the self fundamentally different from the Cartesian individual of Western philosophy.

This is a philosophically serious position that challenges some of Epistemeism's central formulations. If personhood is relational, then the model of individual epistemic inquiry — the lone reasoner examining claims, revising beliefs,

following arguments regardless of communal pressure — may be not merely socially difficult but philosophically mistaken.

Epistemeism does not dismiss this challenge. The communal dimension of knowledge is real and important. Dialogue is central to Epistemeism, not peripheral to it. The correction of error requires interlocutors. The development of ideas requires resistance.

What Epistemeism does resist is the implication that communal consensus is the test of truth. A community can be wrong. A community can be collectively deceived. The individual who stands against communal consensus — the Galileo, the Biko, the Semmelweis who insists that doctors must wash their hands — is not betraying the community. They are serving it in the deepest possible way.

What Epistemeism proposes is a synthesis: the individual epistemic virtue of Ubuntu's relational person. A community of people who each possess genuine epistemic integrity is the kind of community that can produce and maintain genuine wisdom. A community of people who simply defer to one another is not a source of collective wisdom. It is a mechanism for the amplification of collective error.

SECTION XI

POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE FOUCAULDIAN CHALLENGE

Michel Foucault argued, across a career of extraordinary analytical power, that knowledge and power are not merely related but constitutive of each other. What a society takes to be knowledge — the claims that count as true, the methods that count as valid — is produced and maintained by the institutions that serve the dominant interests of that society.

In a South African context, this argument is not abstract. The apartheid state produced an entire apparatus of scientific justification for racial hierarchy. The colonial epistemology that preceded it systematically delegitimised African knowledge traditions — medicine, philosophy, governance, cosmology — and replaced them with European traditions, not on the basis of demonstrated superiority but on the basis of the power to define what counted as knowledge in the first place.

Epistemeism does not respond to Foucault by defending the neutrality of existing knowledge institutions. It responds by sharpening the demand for examination. Every institution that claims to produce knowledge is a legitimate target of critical examination. Every methodology

is subject to interrogation. Every claim to expertise is a claim that must be evaluated against the evidence for the expertise.

This is not a counsel of universal suspicion. It is a counsel of universal scrutiny. The Epistemeist does not relativise knowledge. They demand that the standard of justification be applied consistently — to powerful institutions as rigorously as to the claims of the marginalised.

SECTION XII

FALSIFICATION: POPPER AND THE ENGINE OF TRUTH

Karl Popper's contribution to epistemology is, for the purposes of Epistemeism, the most practically important of the twentieth century. Popper argued that the mark of genuine scientific knowledge is not its capacity to be confirmed by evidence — almost any theory can be made consistent with any evidence if one is creative enough in interpretation — but its capacity to be falsified by evidence.

This shifts the question from what evidence supports my belief to what evidence would refute it, and does that evidence exist? The first question is a search for confirmation, easily supplied by selective attention to evidence. The second is a search for refutation, which, if it fails, provides

the best available grounds for provisional confidence.

Epistemeism endorses the falsificationist standard and applies it to itself. What would falsify Epistemeism? If it could be demonstrated that a systematic, sustained, rigorous pursuit of knowledge consistently produced worse outcomes for individual wellbeing and social cohesion than alternative modes of life, that would constitute a serious challenge. No such demonstration has been made.

Do not seek confirmation. Seek destruction of your own errors. If the belief survives serious attempts to falsify it, hold it provisionally. If it does not, abandon it immediately. Knowledge advances not by confirming what we believe, but by surviving every serious attempt to destroy it.

SECTION XIII

THE EPISTEMEIST SOCIETY

What political and social arrangements does Epistemeism prescribe? The manifesto has addressed this in general terms and requires more specific treatment. Epistemeism is not a complete political philosophy. What it does specify is a set of conditions any society must meet if it is to take seriously its responsibility to the epistemic capacity of its members.

The protection of open inquiry as a fundamental right. A society that restricts the questions that may be asked — for reasons of political convenience, religious orthodoxy, or economic interest — is a society that has decided that its power arrangements are more important than its members' capacity to understand the world. This decision always reflects the interests of those who currently hold power and always damages the interests of those who do not.

The demand for evidential accountability in the exercise of power. Every claim of authority — political, scientific, medical, journalistic, legal — deserves to be evaluated against the evidence for its justification. A politician who claims that a policy will produce certain outcomes is making an empirical prediction that should be tested. The

Epistemeist society does not grant authority to its institutions and then protect them from examination.

The treatment of education as the primary social investment. Education, for the Epistemeist, is not the transmission of established conclusions. It is the development of cognitive character — intellectual honesty, the willingness to revise, the courage to argue. A society that measures its educational success by the quantity of information its students can recall has confused the contents of a library with the capacity to read.

The treatment of propaganda and censorship as attacks on the epistemic capacity of citizens, not as policy tools. Propaganda — the systematic use of misleading information to shape public opinion in the service of power — is treated as a form of epistemic violence, comparable in its effects to the physical violence that societies more readily condemn.

SECTION XIV

EPISTEMEISM AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

This manifesto was written by a South African, in South Africa, at a time when the society around its author is navigating a post-colonial condition in which the colonial legacy of epistemic suppression has not been overcome. It would be dishonest to

present Epistemeism as a view from nowhere. All philosophy is situated. All philosophers are products of the conditions in which they think.

The South African context gives Epistemeism a specific urgency. In a society where the majority of the population was, within living memory, legally excluded from the institutions of formal knowledge production — where the library was a site of political restriction, where the university was a site of racial gatekeeping — the call to pursue knowledge and wisdom is not merely philosophical. It is political. It is an act of reclamation.

Biko understood that the liberation of the mind must precede or accompany the liberation of the body. A people whose self-understanding is colonised — who see themselves through the categories of their oppressors, who have internalised assessments of their own incapacity — cannot build a free society, because they bring the prison with them into every space they inhabit.

Epistemeism says: you have the capacity to know. Not some people, not people with certain characteristics — all people, in virtue of the cognitive capacities that are a feature of human nature, have the capacity to examine claims, evaluate evidence, revise beliefs, and contribute to the collective understanding of the species.

This capacity is not a gift. It is a birthright. And it cannot be taken from you, only suppressed — and suppression can be resisted.

The ambition is intellectual equality: a world in which every person, regardless of geography or origin, has both the tools and the freedom to pursue understanding.

SECTION XV

THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE AND KANTIAN HUMILITY

Immanuel Kant drew, in the Critique of Pure Reason, one of the most important boundaries in the history of epistemology: the boundary between what human reason can know and what it cannot. His argument was that human cognition is structured by categories — space, time, causality, substance — that are brought to experience by the mind itself. The world as we know it is the world of phenomena. The world as it is in itself — the world of noumena — is in principle inaccessible to human knowledge.

The underlying insight — that there are limits to what human cognitive equipment can know, and that wisdom requires the acknowledgement of these limits — is one that Epistemeism endorses without reservation.

The appropriate response to a question that exceeds the current reach of human inquiry is not to manufacture an answer from less rigorous materials — tradition, revelation, wishful thinking — but to acknowledge the limit honestly and continue the inquiry. Metaphysical questions that may be structurally unanswerable do not invalidate the inquiry. They refine it.

This is epistemic humility at its most fundamental: the willingness to say that there are things I do not know, and that I will not pretend otherwise. The person who claims to know what they do not know is not strong. They are dishonest. And dishonesty in the service of a projected confidence is not a virtue. It is the vice of sophistry in its most socially acceptable form.

SECTION XVI

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF INQUIRY

No contemporary philosophical manifesto on knowledge can avoid the question that has recently become urgent: what does the development of powerful artificial intelligence systems mean for the human epistemic project?

AI systems of the kind now being developed are capable, in certain domains, of processing information and generating outputs that exceed human capacity in speed, scale, and consistency. They can read more literature than any human lifetime allows, can identify patterns in data that human perception cannot resolve, can generate arguments and analyses at a rate no individual human can match.

The risk Epistemeism identifies is not that AI will know more than humans. It is that humans will use AI as a substitute for knowing, rather

than as an instrument for extending their capacity to know. A person who asks an AI for an answer and accepts it without evaluating it is not engaging in inquiry. They are outsourcing judgment. The outsourcing of judgment, at scale, to systems whose epistemic commitments are not those of the Epistemeist, is not the advancement of the human capacity to know. It is its abdication.

The Epistemeist uses AI the way they use any other instrument: as a means of extending their own capacity for inquiry, subject to the same standards of evaluation and the same willingness to verify, challenge, and revise that they bring to all other sources of information.

To humans in one hundred years: you will have more data, more power, and more distractions than any generation before you. That will not make you wiser unless you make knowing the purpose of your life. Do not trade understanding for convenience. Do not let systems think for you. If you abandon the pursuit of truth, you abandon what makes you human. Remember the arts, the philosophies, and the history of our species — and use this lifetime to assist humanity into growth and into understanding the vast cosmos.

CONCLUSION: THE ONLY WAY

“To live is not enough. One must know.”
— Adapted from Kierkegaard

There is a passage in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov in which the Elder Zosima addresses his disciples on the subject of active love — love not as a sentiment but as a practice, enacted in the world at the cost of comfort and convenience. He says that active love is hard work and frightening, far harder than the ideal love of humanity that one contemplates in moments of fine feeling. The ideal of humanity is easy to love. The actual human being in front of you, with their noise and their unreasonableness, is another matter entirely.

The same structure applies to the pursuit of knowledge. The ideal of inquiry — the image of oneself as a person of rigorous honesty and open mind — is easy to hold. The actual practice of it, in the face of social pressure and personal discomfort and the sheer cognitive effort required to think carefully about difficult questions, is another matter entirely.

Epistemeism does not pretend otherwise. It does not offer the pursuit of knowledge as a path

to ease. It offers it as the only path available to a human being who is serious about being one.

To live as an Epistemeist is to accept that one is wrong more often than right, and to correct it without delay. It is to measure a person by the quality of their reasons — not by their identity, wealth, or allegiance. It is to prefer a refuted argument that was abandoned over a defended error that is protected.

Epistemeism does not promise happiness. It promises clarity. Happiness without clarity is self-deception. Clarity without happiness is still better than a life built on lies. The pursuit of knowledge does not guarantee comfort, safety, or social approval. It guarantees that one will not live as a fool.

A species that abandons the pursuit of truth in favour of convenience, comfort, and the outsourcing of thought to systems it does not examine has chosen a diminished future quietly and without announcement. Epistemeism is a refusal of that choice. It is a commitment — imperfect, evolving, and permanently open to correction — to remain human in the fullest sense that the word is available to us.

Examine. Correct. Repeat.

Build nothing on what you cannot justify.

Tear down what cannot justify itself.

Keep going.

✶

“To be an Epistemeist is to become the greatest intellectual you can possibly be, with the objective of helping society and yourself.”

— Neo Boesak, Epistemeism Manifesto (2026)

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This manifesto represents original independent philosophical work developed outside any institutional framework. It is submitted for academic review as an evolving inquiry, not a completed system. The author invites critique as a direct continuation of the epistemic process that the work itself describes.

EPISTEMEISM MANIFESTO
“
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Correct.
Repeat.
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Epistemeism holds that the defining function of human life is the pursuit of knowledg
wisdom. This book makes the argument twice: once as the story of Leo Bodase, a man w
everything and found, in the ruins of himself, the only thing worth finding — and once
philosophical manifesto that engages Aristotle, Popper, Biko, Foucault, Camus, and K
“Dare to know. Have the courage to use your own understanding.”
— Immanuel Kant